4

NONFICTION

Sequoyah

In Washington, D.C., there is a bronze statue of Sequoyah in the U.S. Capitol. This Native American of the Cherokee tribe is honored there for the incredible gift he gave to his people: the ability to read and write in their own language.

Sequoyah was born in the 1770s in Taskigi, a Cherokee village in the present-day state of Tennessee. He didn't go to school, and there were no books to read. But he learned many things by listening to the elders' stories about the history and traditions of his tribe.

As he grew older, Sequoyah spent time developing his talent for crafts. He carved objects out of wood with great skill and created beautiful jewelry from silver. In the early 1800s he opened a blacksmith shop where he repaired farm tools and made things from metals. During this time, white settlers were taking more and more land away from the Cherokees. Sequoyah realized that much of the white men's power over his people came from their ability to read and write. Examining pages in their books, he was fascinated by these thin leaves of paper covered with mysterious markings. Soon he began to dream of making "talking leaves" for the Cherokees by finding a way to put their language into writing.

In 1809 Sequoyah began to work on his writing system. At first he tried making pictures to represent words, but he found that many words could not be drawn. Unwilling to give up, he then decided to create a symbol for each of the thousands of Cherokee words. Month after month he filled pieces of bark with markings. Completely **engrossed** in his project, Sequoyah neglected his family responsibilities and his work as a blacksmith. His wife became angry, and his friends made fun of him for wasting his time. As the piles of bark grew ever higher, he finally realized that no one could memorize so many symbols. He needed a new plan.

Sequoyah began to listen carefully to Cherokee words and study the syllable sounds that made up these words. Many of these sounds, he found, were repeated in other words. He became convinced that by making symbols for these syllable sounds, he would be able to combine them and write every word in his language. It took many years, but in 1821 he finished. He had 86 different symbols in his **syllabary** of sounds.

Word of Sequoyah's writing system spread quickly. It was so easy to learn that, before long, many Cherokees were able to read and write their spoken language. They recorded business agreements, wrote down their stories, and sent letters to friends who lived far away. In 1828 the first Native American newspaper was published with articles printed in Cherokee.

The Cherokee National Council presented Sequoyah with a silver medal in recognition of his outstanding contribution. Sequoyah wore this medal with great pride for the rest of his life.

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COMPREHENSION CHECK

1. **Sequoyah was born in a Cherokee village in what part of the United States?**
   - ❍ **A.** the northwest
   - ❍ **B.** the southeast
   - ❍ **C.** New England
   - ❍ **D.** the southwest

2. **When he was a boy, Sequoyah most likely learned from his elders that**
   - ❍ **A.** the tyrannosaurus was a huge meat-eating dinosaur.
   - ❍ **B.** there are 206 bones in the human body.
   - ❍ **C.** animals should be thanked for giving up their lives to feed people.
   - ❍ **D.** Jupiter is the largest planet in our solar system.

3. **Which of these things might Sequoyah have made when he worked as a blacksmith?**
   - ❍ **A.** iron horseshoes
   - ❍ **B.** beautiful baskets made out of twigs
   - ❍ **C.** colorful woven blankets
   - ❍ **D.** deerskin moccasins decorated with beads

4. **"Talking leaves" as used in this biography refers to**
   - ❍ **A.** the sounds made by Cherokee drums.
   - ❍ **B.** the sounds heard in the forests when wind blew through the leaves.
   - ❍ **C.** arguments that the Cherokees had with white settlers about ownership of land.
   - ❍ **D.** sheets of paper covered with writing.

5. **In paragraph five, it says that Sequoyah became completely <u>engrossed</u> in his work. Which of these is the best synonym for *engrossed*?**
   - ❍ **A.** upset
   - ❍ **B.** bored
   - ❍ **C.** fearful
   - ❍ **D.** occupied

6. **Sequoyah developed a <u>syllabary</u>. A *syllabary* is a writing system in which the symbols stand for**
   - ❍ **A.** the meanings of words.
   - ❍ **B.** the letters used in spelling different words.
   - ❍ **C.** the sounds of the syllables in words.
   - ❍ **D.** individual consonants and individual vowels.

7. **How many years did it take for Sequoyah to develop a writing system for the Cherokee people?**
   - ❍ **A.** 5 years
   - ❍ **B.** 12 years
   - ❍ **C.** 2 years
   - ❍ **D.** 9 years

8. **The title that best expresses the main idea of this biography is**
   - ❍ **A.** Life in Taskigi, a Cherokee Village
   - ❍ **B.** Sequoyah, a Master Craftsman
   - ❍ **C.** A Brave Cherokee Warrior
   - ❍ **D.** Sequoyah's Gift to the Cherokees

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